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HOMERIC HEROES AND FISH

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It is well known to all Greek scholars that fish formed one of the chief items in the Hellenic food of the better classes; indeed they were so highly prized that the word for "luxury" or "dainty," *ὄψον*, was also the word for "fish." Demosthenes, *De Falsa Legatione* 229, contrasts his conduct in ransoming Athenian prisoners with that of Philocrates, who betrayed his country for money, and with that money secured harlots and fish, *ὁ δ' ὦν τὰ τῆς πόλεως πράγματα χρημάτων ἀπέδοτο, τούτων πόρνas ἡγόραζε καὶ ἰχθὺς περιίων*. In Aristophanes' *Frogs* 1068 complaint is made that men slip out of paying their just taxes on the ground of poverty, yet bob up at the fish-market. Such passages might be multiplied, but these two show that fish were regarded as the height of luxury by the Athenians. This sentiment was not confined to the Athenians, as a glance at the words *ὄψον* and *ἰχθὺς* in Stephanus will show.

It was early noted that fish formed no part of the Homeric heroes' diet. Plato, *Republic* iii. 404B, says: "Homer never represents his heroes as eating fish at their meals or feasts." Eubulus, as quoted by Athenaeus i. 25C, says:

*ἰχθὺν δ' Ὀμηρος ἐσθίωντ' εἴρηκε ποῦ
τίνα τῶν Ἀχαιῶν;*

In the two passages in Homer, where the companions of Odysseus used fish for food, the explanatory clause is added, "for hunger was gnawing at their stomachs," *δ* 369, *μ* 332, *ἔτειρε δὲ γαστέρα λιμός*.

However, Homer was familiar with the catching of fish, as the many similes derived therefrom prove, but it is evident that fish were little esteemed as food, and the rare mention of their use is excused, as if fish were used only as a last resort, much as a modern

writer might excuse the eating of vermin or other animals regarded as unclean.

In Athenaeus i. 26D the explanation is given that the catching and cleaning of fish lacks dignity or elevation, hence is unsuited to the high characters of the Homeric epic. Professor Seymour gives a full and learned discussion of this subject in his *Life in the Homeric Age*, pp. 219 and 377 ff.

However, he gives no satisfactory solution of the problem, and the story of the ring of Polycrates, the fish and all, shows that a king could be honored by the gift of a fish, and it is evidently an attempt to find an answer for a difficult question to assume that this food was beneath the dignity of the epic heroes.

I have stumbled upon what seems to be the solution of this vexed problem, and, what is of immensely greater importance, it seems to answer the larger question in regard to the home of the poet of these two epics.

Sir William Ramsay in his *Impressions of Turkey* gives a closing chapter which he calls "Tips to Archaeological Travelers," and in this chapter he describes upland trips he has made from Smyrna. Sir William lays stress on the necessity of procuring proper food, especially meat, for such trips, and urges the student to rely on sardines to be taken along, or on kids or lambs to be obtained from the natives, but to avoid fish. Here are his own words in regard to fish, pp. 288 ff.:

Fish are rarely found, and when found are usually bad; the natives have a prejudice against fish, and my own experience has been unfavorable. Fish of considerable size swarm in the Tembris, but are flabby and taste like mud: two hungry archaeologists, after a mouthful or two of such a fish, could eat no more. In the clear, sparkling mountain stream that flows through the Taurus a small kind of fish is caught; I had a most violent attack of sickness after eating some of them, and so had all who partook. In the upper waters of the Hermus alone, where it is a clear mountain stream, have fish been caught which have produced no ill consequences in my experience, but even they were not especially good eating.

The explanatory phrase in Homer ἔτρεπε δὲ γαστέρα λιμός seems to reappear in the words "two hungry archaeologists." Evidently it was no accident that Homer makes his heroes abstain from fish except under great compulsion, and we have here a touch of local

color and of local prejudice. This not only explains an obscure circumstance in the life of the epic heroes, but it gives an additional reason for assigning the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to a poet from Asia Minor. Homer looked upon fish as food with great disfavor because as a native of Asia Minor he had been trained to regard fish as an unhealthful or distasteful food to be eaten only as a last resort and also because he had no feeling for that conception of the European Greek which regarded fish as pre-eminently the *ψῶν*, the greatest luxury.